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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001715

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: INFO MINISTER SAYS SLEIMAN DIRECTS
FOREIGN POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Information Minister Tarek Mitri informed the Ambassador that President Sleiman has assumed a more active role in the formation of foreign policy than his predecessors, without challenges from the Cabinet. Sleiman firmly controls the Lebanon-Syria portfolio, Mitri said, but added that the lack of Syrian reciprocity to Lebanese officials' visits to Syria was likely to be raised in an upcoming cabinet session. Mitri also affirmed that Lebanon and Syria would exchange ambassadors by the end of December, although the selection of the Lebanese ambassador is not yet made.

¶2. (C) Mitri explained that Lebanese electoral alliances will not be "durable alliances," and cautioned against reading too much into pre-electoral linkages. Mitri did not expect the same number of defections among the political factions following the 2009 parliamentary elections as in past years. Parliamentary candidates should campaign on a national platform, rather than local politics, to show that the future of Lebanon was at stake, Mitri strategized. Mitri assessed that President Sleiman would like to form an independent parliamentary bloc, but believed the move was too politically risky. Mitri speculated that the elections would be held in early June, barring any major violence. End summary.

SLEIMAN DIRECTING FOREIGN POLICY

¶3. (C) Minister of Information Tarek Mitri informed the Ambassador and Poloff December 1 that President Sleiman had assumed a more active role in directing foreign policy than his predecessors. Mitri said the Council of Ministers (the cabinet) has given Sleiman tacit approval to define foreign policy objectives, partially because there is "no trust" in Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, he said. Sleiman firmly controls the Lebanon-Syria portfolio, Mitri reported, and has dispatched several officials to visit Damascus since diplomatic relations were formally established in October (most recently Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Gen. Jean Kahwagi).

¶4. (C) Mitri added that when he visited Damascus in

mid-November to attend the Arab Information Ministers conference, his Syrian counterpart, Mohsen Bilal, pushed hard for him to meet one-on-one, on the sidelines of the meeting. Mitri said he did not believe that would have been appropriate at the time, and only had contact with Bilal in the context of the conference. However, Mitri called the lack of Syrian reciprocity to the Lebanese visits a "problem" and a reminder to many of the years Lebanon spent under Syrian tutelage. He anticipated that this issue would be raised in an upcoming cabinet meeting.

15. (C) Mitri also shared that the choice for Lebanon's Ambassador to Syria was not finalized, but expected an announcement by the end of December. The ambassador will likely be career diplomat -- and not a political leader -- and a Christian, leaving only four or five individuals to choose from, he said.

ELECTORAL ALLIANCES FLUID

16. (C) Mitri cautioned against reading too much into electoral alliances. Mitri, who served as acting Foreign Minister during the last government, explained that Lebanese electoral alliances were often temporary measures to gain votes. It would not be uncommon for new alliances and coalitions to be formed soon after the 2009 parliamentary elections. However, he did not expect the same number of political defections, and creation of new coalitions, after the 2009 elections as in previous years. Electoral alliances, he said, are apt to change at any time.

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17. (C) Mitri is a Greek Orthodox Christian independent who is part of March 14 but who is not identified with one political party. He said that as a private citizen, he would like to hear the political parties campaign on a national platform and actively work to convince voters that the stakes in the upcoming election are high and will impact the future of Lebanon and its democracy. Although Mitri was appointed by Saad Hariri's March 14 majority coalition, he said he could never vote for March 14 Christian figures like Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea or Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel unless they adhered to the principles and values of the Lebanese people rather than pursue personal interests. Mitri said Christian candidates will need to capture the votes of March 14 Christians, supporters of opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun, and undecided voters to be successful in the elections. An alliance like March 14 needs to provide space for "credible, respectable people" who may not subscribe to specific factions to become candidates to win the elections, he opined.

18. (C) President Sleiman, he said, would like to create his own parliamentary bloc. However, this would be extremely politically risky for Sleiman, irrespective of the number of MPs in such a bloc, because it would diminish Sleiman's credibility, Mitri said.

19. (C) In addition, Mitri said that what appeared to be a targeted attack on a journalist for Saad Hariri's news organization on November 29 had made people nervous. "Tensions are high and the intelligence is vague," he said; any type of violence could put the elections at risk. However, Mitri thought an escalation in violence was unlikely as long as each side believed it would win. Mitri guessed that the elections would be held sometime in early June.

COMMENT

110. (C) Mitri has held several cabinet positions through the years, but shows no sign of having any political ambitions of his own. While he shared his electoral strategy suggestions for March 14 with us, it is not clear whether he has, or

would be willing to, offer his advice to March 14's Christian factions, directly. Meanwhile, several political figures are pushing the idea of an independent political bloc backed by President Sleiman publicly and privately. Since forming a unity government in July, Sleiman has made 12 trips abroad, including to the U.S., France, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and received many more foreign officials in Beirut. End comment.

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